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NARROW ESCAPE OF THE U. S. S. PONTICUS

Thrilling Tale of the War Reveals Spy Plot That Failed

Hitherto Untold Story of Effort to Seize Supply Ship Reads Almost Like Fiction in Its Melodramatic Situations, Remarkable Coincidences and Tragic Finale

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THIS story has never before been told. It is known to but a handful of persons, all pledged to secrecy. Even as it appears in these pages permission was secured for its publication only on the condition that all names, significant dates, latitudes, longitudes, &c., should be veiled, the authorities presumably thinking that the fate of Johnson, as he is here called, should not be revealed. Evidently they hold that to die, as he did, unmourned, unhonored and unsung would rob him of that posthumous distinction in the fatherland which might have established a precedent in future wars, and even have encouraged others to emulate his example in the one lately ended.

On the other hand, the episode is well worthy of record for the light it throws on the psychology and methods of the foreign spy and for a warning to our splendid naval officers of what some day they may encounter when engaged in hostilities with an unscrupulous enemy. And here it may be timely to suggest that "when the guns begin to play" it is the part of prudence always to assume that the enemy is unscrupulous.

While still in didactic mood the narrator hopes that two other points in this brief history will not be overlooked. The first is that the mere smattering of a foreign tongue will be of little avail in counter-espionage, despite the advocacy by the unenlightened of the teaching of German in our schools to the end that the student may understand what Germans say to each other—a wildly preposterous notion, by the way, but useful propaganda for the German sympathizers in our midst. The second is that the events herein recounted show the necessity of not disclosing inadvisedly the possession of thorough familiarity with an alien tongue, else might its usefulness in time of war be wholly lost. After this preamble the relator adopts the first person singular, for it is of his own experiences that he here speaks, and for the first time.

WHEN I was eight years of age my father was sent to Berlin as the representative of a certain American business corporation. He took the family with him, for the length of his stay in Germany was indefinite. He put me in a good German school and insisted on my learning that language perfectly. "You must," he told me, "get to read, write speak, and, above all, think in German."

As soon as I grew big enough he sent me every summer, with my German boy friends, on long walking trips. These *wanderjahre*, or "travel-years," were only varied by short cruises in the Baltic on board of his small sloop yacht. He had a summer home on the island of Rugen, off which the Hildegarde rode peacefully at her moorings when not under way. In this manner I acquired an intimate acquaintance with the speech of the Hildegarde's German crew—as well as a fondness for the sea.

When I was about fifteen years old he had a talk with me, in which he commended my perfect command over German, adding: "You seem to have a taste for a nautical life. Why not test it by making one trip in a sailing craft and another in a steamer?" As this proposition chimed in with my fancy I eagerly embraced it—so part of that summer's vacation was spent on a brig plying between Lubeck and Helsingfors, the rest on a steamer of the Hamburg-American line to the North Cape—in both cases as a deck hand. All this was incidental to my preparation for college and the law course we had agreed that I should take later.

Father Tells Why He Insisted On Intensive Study of German

The following spring I was sent home to enter Princeton University. Before starting, my father explained to me his reasons for my intensive German language training. "I hope I am wrong," he said, "but I cannot help seeing indications of an intent on Germany's part before many years to wage a new war of aggression. It is in the air and every one talks about it. If this war breaks out it is possible that we shall become involved, in which case our navy will have a large share in the campaign. I know that Germany leans heavily on her spy system and I feel confident she will endeavor to place trusted men on board our ships to disable or destroy them and otherwise thwart our plans. I want you, therefore, when you settle in New York, to join the Naval Militia. But be careful not to let strangers become aware of your linguistic acquirements."

Of course this is merely the gist of several confidential talks—not so much between father and son as man to man. I did not agree with him, for I felt that "Deutschland uber Allies," "Die Wacht am Rhein" and similar songs were merely the outburst of a laudable patriotic sentiment, a blowing off of superfluous steam, so to speak. Nevertheless I knew him to be wise and farseeing, and that no harm could come from following his advice.

Then ensued four delightful years at Princeton. After receiving my degree of B. A. I entered the Columbia Law School and at the same time joined the New York Naval Militia, spending at least two evenings every week on board the old sailing line-of-battle ship New Hampshire, rechristened Granite State.

One "Charles Johnson" Pushes Himself Rapidly to the Front.

It was here that I met him whom I am compelled to call, not by his right name, but "Charles Johnson." He joined up during my last year in the organization. His was an engaging personality. Well educated and a tiptop sailor, he forged rapidly to the front. He professed to have served on board several vessels of the American Line before quitting the sea and entering an importing house in the city. Indeed, he was exceptionally frank in speaking of his early life. Whether he overdid this role of candor, or whether it was that his bearing belied his words (for he carried himself with an erectness and precision of movement rarely to be found in a sailor and suggesting a military rather than a naval education), which aroused my distrust, I cannot say, but I could not escape the feeling that he was playing a part and was not really what he purported to be.

Whatever the reason or the instinct, I could not bring myself to fraternize cordially with him, as did my shipmates. Something kept us apart, although our relations were always pleasant enough. In brief, I was not drawn to him, popular as he was with the others. All during this time I had scrupulously observed my father's injunctions, so that not a soul on board the Granite State was aware of my familiarity with the German language. It was due to this reticence on my part that I was able, subsequently, to be of some service to my country.

When Congress declared that a state of war existed between the United States and the German Empire, practically all of us of the Granite State volunteered for duty afloat. I enlisted at once, soon was rated a quartermaster, second class, and assigned to a battleship. Here I was fortunate enough to win the approbation of my officers, who procured for me admission to the intensive course of instruction at Annapolis, whence I emerged as an ensign in the Naval Reserve.

Passing rapidly over my various employments I come to the day in the spring of 1918, when I received orders to the fuel and store ship Ponticus. On reporting I found that her commanding officer was the same Charles Johnson whom I had met previously on board the Granite State. He was now a Lieutenant-Commander and I only a Lieutenant. He received me with overflowing expressions of welcome so that I felt justified in looking forward to a very agreeable association. My position was that of executive and senior watch officer. The latter duty was shared by two fine fellows—one a Yale graduate, the other a Cornell man.

The ship, which already had on board a quantity of TNT and vanadium ore, the latter metal an important ingredient in high speed tool steel and worth almost its weight in gold, was ordered to a Gulf port to fill up with oil and then to proceed to Queenstown, the base of our oil burning destroyers, some twenty in number.

Captain Talks in German Of "These Idiotic Americans"

The first few weeks of the voyage were devoid of interest. But, on our way north after leaving the Gulf, we encountered off Cape Hatteras thick weather, fresh gales and heavy seas. Coming up on deck one evening after dark I went to the weather side to have a look about, hoping for signs of improved conditions. None could be noticed. In fact the night was so black that nothing could be seen. I then came back amidships and, holding on to the hand rail at the side of the deck house, to which I clung to steady myself against the deep rolling of the ship, I worked aft to the end of the house, where I turned and followed it almost all the way across.

At this point, to my utter astonishment, my ears, which are exceptionally keen, caught the sound of fluent German in an undertone and I recognized the voice of whom later I identified as a quartermaster, named Smith. They were to leeward of the deck house and just around the corner from me.

The noise of the wind whistling through the rigging and upper works of the Ponticus had so drowned the fall of my footsteps that my approach was not perceived by them. Naturally my suspicions were aroused to the fullest and I had no hesitation in eavesdropping. Although I listened intently I could make out but a word here and there; still I did catch the expression made famous by Von Papen "diese blodselige Amerikaner" (these idiotic Americans) also allusions to a U-boat, which they seemed to expect to meet, and some phrases as to "fixing" the compasses.

Loyal Yankees Take Measures To Circumvent Any Plot

This was enough to convince me that Johnson was a German emissary doubtless bent on mischief. Once the fact became clear to me, I slipped back unnoticed to map out a plan of campaign. Quietly summoning my colleagues, Baker and Stedman, I held with them a conference on the bridge of the ship, at which it was agreed to keep our eyes and ears wide open, but to do nothing until something should occur to call for prompt action or until the Captain had committed himself beyond recall by an overt act. After much discussion, we determined to take the wireless operators into our confidence. They were good loyal Yankees, who would at once communicate to us any suspicious message sent or received.

The next few days were far from pleasant. We felt that we were on the brink of a volcano and an active one at that. Physically, too, we were most uncomfortable, for we were in the clutches of a howling northeast gale, with a tremendous sea running. The skies also were unfriendly; neither sun nor star showed itself—so that we navigated by dead reckoning alone. One morning, at about daybreak, Stedman, who was in charge of the deck, sent for me to come up as quickly as I could. I tumbled out of my bunk, jumped into my uniform, threw on my peajacket and hurried to the bridge.

"What's up?" I asked.

"There's —— to pay and no pitch hot," replied Stedman.

"What is the matter, Stedman?"

"You know, Cantwell, that we are going by dead reckoning? Well, the Captain passed an order last evening that, as the weather was so bad and the sea so heavy, he would excuse the officers from taking sights, but that he should be called if an opportunity offered for getting the sun or a star. I thought this very queer, because in weather like this you have to shoot on the wing, so to speak, or you'll get no observation whatever. Half an hour ago the clouds broke away for a moment or two, and, in spite of the captain's kind (?) permission, I got sights of the North Star and Arcturus. Unless my work is all wrong, we are much to the southward and eastward of our dead reckoning position—moreover the compass is in error by at least a point to the eastward. Looks as though Johnson were getting in his fine work."

Not wishing to give rise to any talk I replied loudly:

"Thanks, Stedman, I think you had better put extra lashings around those boats, the ship is rolling so deeply, and tell the coxswains to see that the plugs are out and the oars secured in place." Then—sotto voce—"keep dark, but take a good look inside and around the binnacle—you'll find a hidden magnet or a displaced quadrantal sphere, but for goodness sake leave things as they are." Again loudly, "Better see that the hatches are well battened down. Call me if it gets worse."

Down to my room I went to mull over the situation. Something had to be done and that without delay. While pondering, my head in my hands, "Sparks," the wireless operator, entered the room with his finger to his lips.

"This message came just now, sir. It's for us all right, but I can't make it out. It must be in code, but the code is a new one to me."

"Ponticus . . . Barcelona, puritanic, excelsior, congeries."

I copied it and told him to take it to the Captain in the usual way, and not to let him know that any other person had seen it.

The plot was thickening, I perceived. However, it would not do to spring the trap too quickly, we must be sure of our quarry first. So I lay down again on my bunk pretending to sleep. At six bells my morning coffee was brought me and I sent word to Baker to come in and share the cheering cup with me; quite a common practice on the Ponticus and one not likely to occasion remark.

When he put in an appearance I told him in a low voice what had happened and asked his advice. After going into the matter in all its bearings we agreed upon the course to pursue, but to make no move till that evening, when the necessary steps could be taken with all secrecy and less chance of a miscarriage in our plans or of open scandal. We went over and over again the details of our procedure, viewing them from every angle.

Also we tried to see ourselves in the true light. One moment we were heroes, the next hysterical and inexperienced youngsters, face to face with a crisis out of which we might emerge beaten and discredited. Possibly the conversation I had overheard was susceptible of a satisfactory explanation? But, no, this last interpretation was rejected as soon as suggested and we swung around the circle of our discussion back to the starting point. We were confronted with an emergency which demanded immediate action at all costs. Should we be wrong, we must accept the responsibility for our error and abide by the consequences. As Baker said, "It is better to lose our commissions for doing too much than for letting a d—— Hun run away with this ship."

A Tedious Day of Waiting, Then Comes Excitement Aplenty

I hope never again to spend such a tedious, heartbreaking day. Time moved on leaden wings. It seemed as though the night would never fall. Yet, eventually, fall it did.

When the fateful hour did arrive, events began to happen with startling rapidity. Armed with an automatic, "Sparks" called the German quartermaster into the wireless operating room, tapped him on the head to insensibility, bound him hand and foot, gagged him and then held him prisoner with a pistol at his head to keep him absolutely quiet. We would return later, we told "Sparks," and finish up Smith's case.

Leaving "Sparks" to stand guard over the traitor, Baker and I started for the cabin to undertake our major operation.

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